



# White Teeth

By Zadie Smith

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On New Year's morning, 1975, Archie Jones sits in his car on a London road and waits for the exhaust fumes to fill his Cavalier Musketeer station wagon. Archie--working-class, ordinary, a failed marriage under his belt--is calling it quits, the deciding factor being the flip of a 20-pence coin. When the owner of a nearby halal butcher shop (annoyed that Archie's car is blocking his delivery area) comes out and bangs on the window, he gives Archie another chance at life and sets in motion this richly imagined, uproariously funny novel.

Epic and intimate, hilarious and poignant, **White Teeth** is the story of two North London families--one headed by Archie, the other by Archie's best friend, a Muslim Bengali named Samad Iqbal. Pals since they served together in World War II, Archie and Samad are a decidedly unlikely pair. Plodding Archie is typical in every way until he marries Clara, a beautiful, toothless Jamaican woman half his age, and the couple have a daughter named Irie (the Jamaican word for "no problem"). Samad--devoutly Muslim, hopelessly "foreign"--weds the feisty and always suspicious Alsana in a prearranged union. They have twin sons named Millat and Magid, one a pot-smoking punk-cum-militant Muslim and the other an insufferable science nerd. The riotous and tortured histories of the Joneses and the Iqbals are fundamentally intertwined, capturing an empire's worth of cultural identity, history, and hope.

Zadie Smith's dazzling first novel plays out its bounding, vibrant course in a Jamaican hair salon in North London, an Indian restaurant in Leicester Square, an Irish poolroom turned immigrant café, a liberal public school, a sleek science institute. A winning debut in every respect, **White Teeth** marks the arrival of a wondrously talented writer who takes on the big themes--faith, race, gender, history, and culture--and triumphs.

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## White Teeth By Zadie Smith Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

### Amazon.com Review

Epic in scale and intimate in approach, *White Teeth* is a formidably ambitious debut. First novelist Zadie Smith takes on race, sex, class, history, and the minefield of gender politics, and such is her wit and inventiveness that these weighty subjects seem effortlessly light. She also has an impressive geographical range, guiding the reader from Jamaica to Turkey to Bangladesh and back again.

Still, the book's home base is a scrubby North London borough, where we encounter Smith's unlikely heroes: prevaricating Archie Jones and intemperate Samad Iqbal, who served together in the so-called Buggered Battalion during World War II. In the ensuing decades, both have gone forth and multiplied: Archie marries beautiful, bucktoothed Clara--who's on the run from her Jehovah's Witness mother--and fathers a daughter. Samad marries stropky Alsana, who gives birth to twin sons. Here is multiculturalism in its most elemental form: "Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that secrete within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checks."

Big questions demand boldly drawn characters. Zadie Smith's aren't heroic, just real: warm, funny, misguided, and entirely familiar. Reading their conversations is like eavesdropping. Even a simple exchange between Alsana and Clara about their pregnancies has a comical ring of truth: "A woman has to have the private things--a husband needn't be involved in body business, in a lady's... parts." And the men, of course, have their own involvement in bodily functions:

The deal was this: on January 1, 1980, like a New Year dieter who gives up cheese on the condition that he can have chocolate, Samad gave up masturbation so that he might drink. It was a deal, a business proposition, that he had made with God: Samad being the party of the first part, God being the sleeping partner. And since that day Samad had enjoyed relative spiritual peace and many a frothy Guinness with Archibald Jones; he had even developed the habit of taking his last gulp looking up at the sky like a Christian, thinking: I'm basically a good man.

Not all of *White Teeth* is so amusingly carnal. The mixed blessings of assimilation, for example, are an ongoing torture for Samad as he watches his sons grow up. "They have both lost their way," he grumbles. "Strayed so far from what I had intended for them. No doubt they will both marry white women called Sheila and put me in an early grave." These classic immigrant fears--of dilution and disappearance--are no laughing matter. But in the end, they're exactly what gives *White Teeth* its lasting power and undeniable bite. --*Eithne Farry*

### From Publishers Weekly

The scrambled, heterogeneous sprawl of mixed-race and immigrant family life in gritty London nearly overflows the bounds of this stunning, polymathic debut novel by 23-year-old British writer Smith. Traversing a broad swath of cultural territory with a perfect ear for the nuances of identity and social class, Smith harnesses provocative themes of science, technology, history and religion to her narrative. Hapless Archibald Jones fights alongside Bengali Muslim Samad Iqbal in the English army during WWII, and the two develop an unlikely bond that intensifies when Samad relocates to Archie's native London. Smith traces the trajectory of their friendship through marriage, parenthood and the shared disappointments of poverty and deflated dreams, widening the scope of her novel to include a cast of vibrant characters: Archie's beautiful Jamaican bride, Clara; Archie and Clara's introspective daughter, Irie; Samad's embittered wife,

Alsana; and Alsana and Samad's twin sons, Millat and Magid. Torn between the pressures of his new country and the old religious traditions of his homeland, Samad sends Magid back to Bangladesh while keeping Millat in England. But Millat falls into delinquency and then religious extremism, as earnest Magid becomes an Anglophile with an interest in genetic engineering, a science that Samad and Millat repudiate. Smith contrasts Samad's faith in providence with Magid's desire to seize control of the future, involving all of her characters in a debate concerning past and present, determinism and accident. The tooth--half root, half protrusion--makes a perfect trope for the two families at the center of the narrative. A remarkable examination of the immigrant's experience in a postcolonial world, Smith's novel recalls the hyper-contemporary yet history-infused work of Rushdie, sharp-edged, fluorescent and many-faceted. Agent, Georgia Garrett. (May)

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From Library Journal

Smith (recently profiled in an issue of *The New Yorker*) has written an epic tale of two interconnected families. It begins with the suicide attempt of hapless, coin-flipping Archibald Jones on New Year's Day, 1975, and ends, after a 100-year ramble back and forth through time, on New Year's Eve, 1992, with his accidental (or preordained?) release of a poor mutant mouse programmed to do away with the randomness of creation. Smith evokes images of teeth throughout the novel. Do they symbolize some characteristic shared by all of humanity in this novel about ethnicity, class, belonging, homeland, family, adolescence, identity, blindness, and ignorance? Or are they meant to distract the reader from the all-encompassing theme of fate? Smith's characters are tossed about by decisions made deliberately, rashly, or by the flip of a coin. As Smith pieces together this story with bits of fabric from different times and places, the reader must contemplate whether our choices determine our future or whether fate leads us to an inevitable destiny. This fine first novel from Smith is most highly recommended for all libraries.

---Rebecca A. Stuhr, *Grinnell Coll. Libs., IA*

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